

## CHAPTER 4

### Witch-hunting: The Context

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## **CHAPTER 4**

### **WITCH-HUNTING: THE CONTEXT**

The issue of witch-hunting stretches to a wide range of theories and arguments across disciplines of social sciences. It is considered to be a global issue in the contemporary world. A number of studies have been carried out in different countries by various scholars and from different perspectives.

Researchers from cultural studies discipline generally investigate how cultural practices relate to wider systems of power associated with or operating through social phenomena, such as ideology, class structure, discourse, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, ritual and religion. Culture can be viewed not as fixed and discrete entity that hold a distinct space of growing in solitary but rather as constantly interacting and changing sets of practices and processes.

Witch-hunting is one of the kinds of practice that grows in constant association with cultural activities, belief systems and lifestyle of a society. Examining these practices, the study on witch-hunting is carried out by understanding and following the theories and contexts of culture and power, and the same are mentioned in this chapter.

#### **4.1 Context of witchcraft**

Magic is well associated with witchcraft. There are two types of magic in witchcraft, viz. 1) Imitative magic and 2) Contagious Magic (Frazer, 1966). The imitative magic is practiced by witches or sorcerers using a precise set of formulas to achieve a specific ends by imitating them. It is believed that whatever is done by the witch on the image will actually happen to the person aimed at. The technique to regulate the speed of death or severity of illness is well developed so that death may be brought about rapidly and violently, or it may be slowly and in a lingering pain. Sometimes they are believed to take the form of a black cat in which form the cat will climb on the bed or house of the enemy and touch him/her and the person will get sick and die. The exercise of this magical power is done in secret because it is illicit and anti social. It must, however, be

noted that witches stay very careful in their practice because there is always the danger of counter-effects of their own craft. Sometimes, if the magic does not affect the person for whom the witch has intended, it rebounds and hits either some members of the family or the domestic animals, and sometimes when the magic is counteracted by another more powerful magician the magic spell will hit the witch and he may lose his/her life in eternity (Thumra 2006, 62).

Contagious magic is principally practiced by witches who are from tribal society. It is believed that any part of a person such as clothes, hair, ornaments, comb, nails, etc. anything that has been a part of that person before or now, can still be used by the magician particularly witch, to affect the family members of that person and to another. This form of contagious magic is also called exuvial magic because it involves the use of human exuviae like- hair, teeth, nail clippings, placenta and the umbilical cord of a newborn child. Thus any organic material as well as the inorganic articles such as clothing, personal possessions or other objects once in contact with a person, including footprints or names of persons can be used in the contagious magic. Therefore, tribal people take special care to see that these things do not fall into the hands of the enemies or are picked up by the witches. In early years almost all the tribals in India bury the umbilical cord and the placenta inside the house, especially under the hearth which is the most unlikely spot in the house for an enemy to take it in order to save their child from the hand of the magician and from death (ibid, 65).

Amongst the Bodo tribal community of Assam, the contagious magic is believed to be practiced so far the field data of the research investigation reveals. So, this idea of contagious magic put forward by Jonathan H. Thumra is very much applicable to the study. Justification of the use of the idea has been made accordingly in chapter five supported and justified by the narratives (field data) of villagers of Bodo community living in Assam.

## **4.2 Context of witch-hunting**

Witch hunting is a social issue for a particular group of people and witchcraft is an issue for the other group. The term 'group' here refers to the 'outsider society' and 'insider society'. The 'insider society' signify people who live in the village/community/society/place where the incident of witch-hunting cases take place and the 'outsider society' here means the people who are stranger to the insiders of witch-hunting cases and are not residing in the area or place where the incidence of witch-hunting cases took/take place.

The two groups have different perspective which goes in two opposite direction. Witch-hunting has become an issue because of the difference in perspectives. It is because the 'insider society' regard witchcraft as an issue and the after effect is when 'outsider society' regards witch-hunting as an issue. The issue of witch-hunting gets confused with the questions of "who is the victim?" and "who is the perpetrator?" In this regard, the notion of 'victim' and 'perpetrator' has a vast difference in the outsiders' and the insiders' point of views. These two different notions also stretch its arena towards the existence of variety of discourses. There are some bases in the formation of such discourses that centers on the idea of binary oppositions. Another important question that the issue of witch-hunting surrounds with is about the power relations between "witch-hunters and witches" because of which witch-hunting is practiced. They are discussed below accordingly.

### **4.2.1 Notion of 'victim' and 'perpetrator'**

Konwar and Swargiari (2015) in their research article identified that, for the insider society, the one who harm the community members is the 'perpetrator' who is called a 'witch' and according to them the 'victim' is the one/person who suffers by the spell/curse of the witch, 'the ill person'. And for the outsider society, the one/group/community members who hunt the witches are 'perpetrator' who are called 'witch-hunters' and according to them the 'victim' is the 'witch'.

The sufferer or the ill person in their society is regarded a victim according to the insiders because they are made weak by the power of the witch. As their member had to suffer for that witch, the people of that community try to rescue the victim (sufferer who

suffers from sickness, illness, misfortune, accident, death etc) from the perpetrator (witch). When one is identified as witch, the people in that area organize a village meeting and resolve to exclude the witch (be it female or male) from the society by way of killing, chasing away or ex-communicating. For them hunting the identified witch is permissible and the hunters admit it without any repentance or remorse. The witch hunters or the accusers believe that they are fully justified in their acts as the witch brings illness, death, misfortune and accident. According to them, the witch harms the society or members of the community one after the other. So, they think that they are obliged to kill or ex-communicate or banish the witch in order to protect the community from ills and death. The witch-hunters believe that they should not make the witch a part of their social life, which therefore had to be eliminated both physically and socially. They think their violence is to restore normal life but their understanding is never accepted by the outsiders. It is a big question in their mind (Konwar and Swargiari 2015, 133).

For the outsiders, the idea of ‘victim’ and ‘perpetrator’ is different from that of insiders’ viewpoint. Here in witch-hunting cases, the notion of ‘victim’ is similar to the other cases like in murder, criminality and other such accusations. The alleged witch is regarded as the victim and the people who hunt and torture the witch are the perpetrator. In the hunting or accusation, there is an involvement of the ill person, family members of the ill person and members of their village or community, who are called perpetrators because they kill, abandon and banish and hound the alleged witch (ibid, 2015).

The ‘victim’ of witch-hunting is the ‘perpetrator’ of ‘witchcraft’ and the ‘perpetrator’ of witch-hunting is the ‘victim’ of witchcraft. In order to understand the notion of ‘victim’ and ‘perpetrator’ more clearly, a model called “standpoint model of witch-hunting” has been created. Standpoint model of witch-hunting is a model where people conceived idea of ‘victim’ and ‘perpetrator’ which is generally associated with ‘the sufferer’ and ‘the attacker’, respectively. For insiders the victim or the sufferer is the one who is ill by the spell of the alleged witch. That witch is popularly known a perpetrator or the attacker to their community. They are strong in their belief, firm standpoint and this idea happens to be tough to deconstruct by any external force/means like law, order or bail.

And for the outsiders, the sufferer is the witch and the people who support the ill person of their community and attack the witch by means of mental and physical torture are the perpetrators. They regard witchcraft as a superstitious belief of the remote and uneducated community. The outsiders are also firm at their viewpoint or standpoint, and try to eliminate witch-hunting by means of governmental law and order.

#### 4.2.1.1 “The Standpoint model of Witch-hunting”

**Fig. 15:** Insiders’ standpoint

Figure 15.1

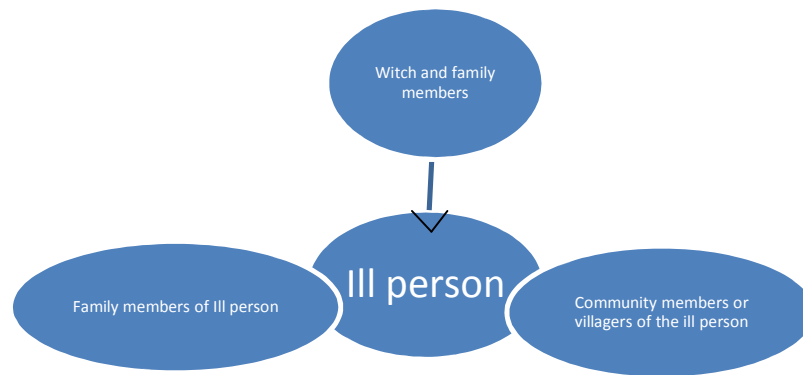


Figure 15.2

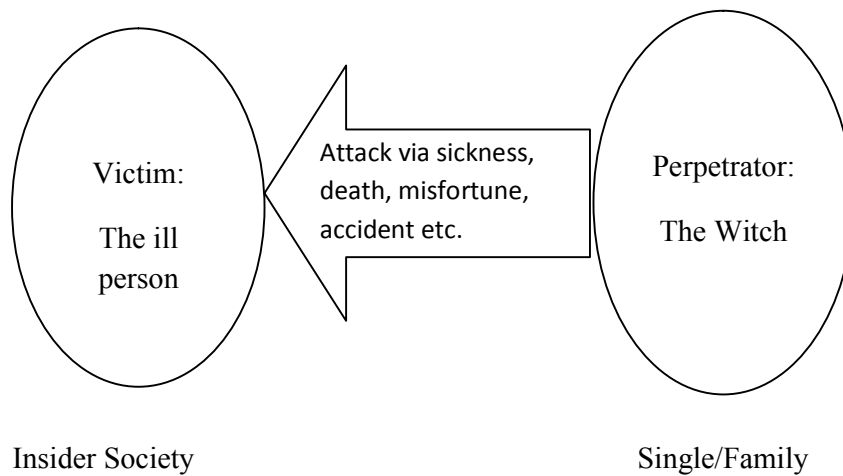
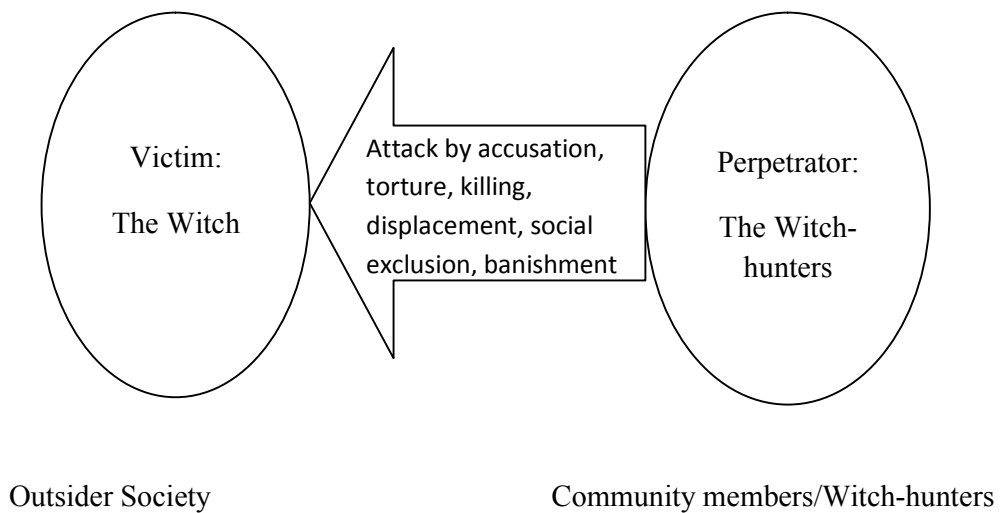


Fig. 16: Outsiders' standpoint

Figure 16.1



Figure 16.2



#### **4.2.1.2 Justification of “The Standpoint model of Witch-hunting”**

The model shows two different standpoints between two different groups of people i.e. ‘the insiders’ and ‘the outsiders’. There are both horizontal ovals and vertical ovals in both standpoint (Figure 15) and standpoint (Figure 15) in the structure of the model which tries to make a support of one another both for insiders’ and outsiders’ standpoints differently.

The first horizontal ovals in Figure 15.1 shows insiders’ standpoint that the accused witch and sometimes their family members are the people who spell on the ill person. They are regarded harmful for their society. The ill person, their family members, their community members and their village members are therefore joined hands together in their ideas, discussions and decisions. The witch and their family members are kept segregated and unsupported. As a result of which the three horizontal ovals are interconnected and joined forming a triangle structure and the one on top is kept unsupported and separate.

The first vertical ovals having two layers, in Figure 15.2, shows that the insider society is supporting ‘the ill person’ and regard him or her as ‘the sufferer’. The other vertical oval shows that ‘the witch’ is treated and regarded as ‘the perpetrator’, and so, (s) he is kept isolated, single or with family members.

The second horizontal ovals, Figure 16.1, shows outsiders’ standpoint that the ill person and their family members; their community and the witch-hunters are all involved in accusing and hunting the witch for which reason the witch and his/her family members are suffering from mental and physical torture. The people who are not the members of that community or insider society and both the government and non-government organizations are against this act of accusing, hunting and torturing the witch. As a result of which the three horizontal ovals are interconnected and joined forming a triangle structure and the one on top is kept unsupported and separate.

The second vertical ovals having two layers in Figure 16.2, shows that the outsider society is supporting ‘the witch’ and regards him or her as ‘the victim’. The other vertical oval shows that ‘the witch-hunters’ are treated and regarded as ‘the perpetrator’, and so, they are taken to jail, arrested and bailed (Ibid, 135).



#### **4.2.2 Discourse and power relations**

The two primary questions ‘why’ and ‘how’ are being asked by the researchers in Cultural discourses. One of the most common questions regarding witch-hunt might probably be the first question for the study attached to cultural studies- “why do witch-hunts happen?”

As a theory and method of studying the witch-hunting practice prevalent in the state of Assam, Foucaultian discourse analysis can be applicable here. This analysis is neither conversation nor language analysis but a text and context analysis.

Discourse analysis propounded by Michel Foucault is a developing area of qualitative social science research. The reason for its wider applicability in all social science disciplines is evidently due to the influence of masses about the facts like discourse is a social structure and discursive practice is a social practice. Discourse produces perception and representation of social realities which are led by dominant interpretations. What are social realities and what are dominant interpretations here, in witch-hunting practice? It is a matter of fact that there is no single and one sided social reality and dominant interpretation in the practice of witch-hunts because both the groups i.e. - outsiders and insiders play an active role in executing their own power. Discourse is a tool of power that helps in production of dominant interpretations and determination of social realities.

Michel Foucault (1981) describes,

When viewed from the level of a proposition, on the inside of a discourse, the division between true or false is neither arbitrary nor modifiable nor institutional or violent. But when we view things on a different scale or ask the question of what this will be to the truth which has crossed so many centuries of our history; what is in its general form, the type of division which governs our will to know, then what we see taking shape is perhaps something like a system of exclusion, a historical, modifiable, and institutionally constraining system.

The discursive formation of the practice of witch-hunting happens to be a complex phenomenon that revolves round two different angles:

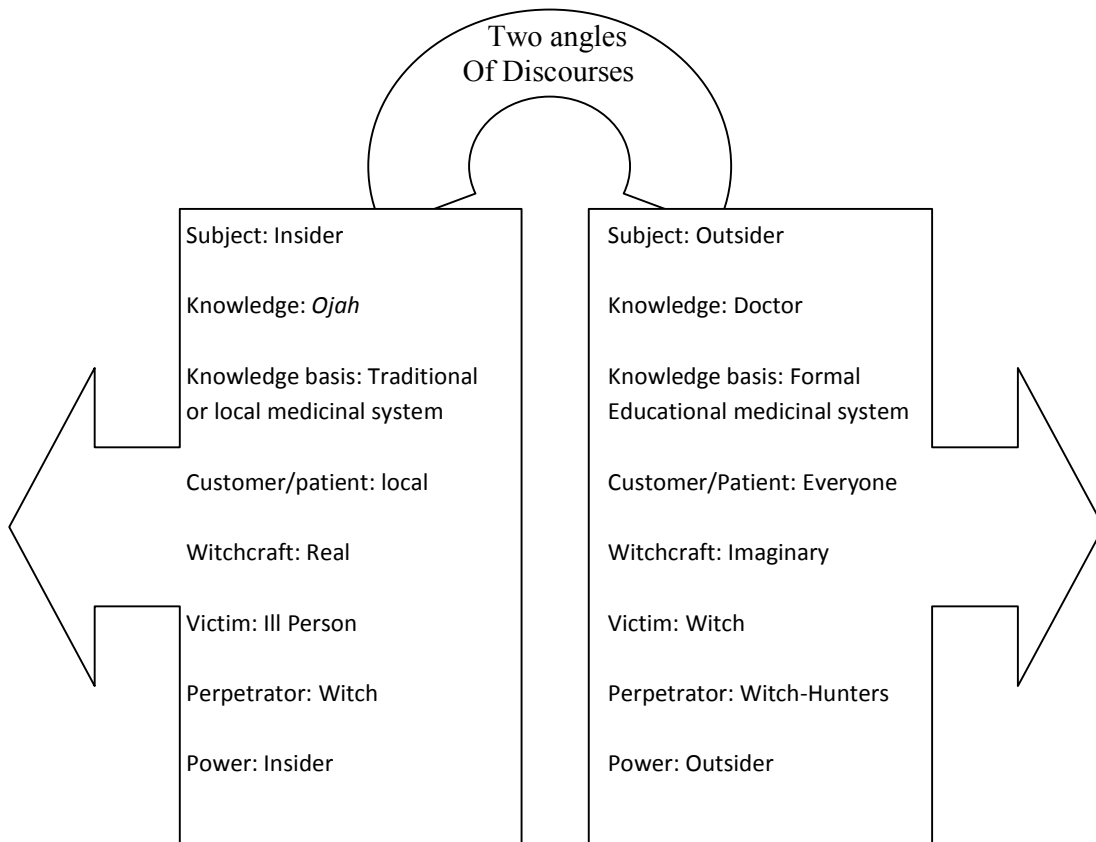
a) Discourse in witch-hunting: It particularly has binary opposite kind of way of looking at things; one is the insiders’ discourse and the other is outsiders’ discourse which can also be

called as the insiders’ power and outsiders’ power because both of the discourses can hold the power in their own space.

b) Power relations between the witch and the witch-hunters: It shows the power relations within the same group called ‘insider’. It is specifically the discursive aspect of the ‘witch’ and the ‘witch-hunters’. Just because the witch-hunters (having dominant power) can fulfill the ultimate target of the practice of witch-hunting, there is killing, displacement or ostracization of the witch (having marginalized and victimized) and the witch remains threatened.

**4.2.1.1 “Discursive Formation of the Practice of Witch-Hunting”**

**Fig. 17:** Discourse in witch-hunting



**Fig. 18:** Power relations between witch and witch-hunters

<b>Witch</b>	<b>Witch-hunters</b>
1) Harmful for the society 2) Servant of evil spirit 3) Single or family supported 4) Physically and mentally weak 5) Powerless and dominated 6) Obey the witch-hunters 7) Suffer because of killing, displacement and ostracization by witch hunters	1) Protector of the Society 2) Servant of human being 3) Group or villagers supported 4) Physically and mentally strong 5) Powerful and dominant 6) Force the witch 7) Enjoy killing, displacing and ostracizing the witch

**4.2.1.2 Justification of “Discursive Formation of the Practice of Witch-hunting”**

The idea of discursive formation of witch-hunting have been conceived and influenced by the theory on the basis of discourse and power relations. It is important to note what Foucault (1994) had rightly said, “When the question of an issue is a difficult one, it is more probable that there were few rather than many to discover the truth about it.” Over against this history, and lacking any common unit of measurement with it, are the confident judgments we are able to make by means of intuitions and their serial connection. The manifestation and sign of truth are to be found in evident and distinct perception. It is the task of words to translate that truth if they can; but they no longer have the right to be considered a mark of it (Foucault, 1994).

In fig. 17, the first argument is for the discourses in witch-hunting. It shows that there are two structural truths orbiting around the cases of witch-hunting. Those truths are two opposite discourses by two different groups. The chart points the characteristic of opposition regarding the same theme.

It is that insiders as the subject holds outsider as false and this knowledge are communicated from *ojah* to the insiders. The knowledge basis of the *Ojah* is traditional or local medicinal system whose customer/patient is target group of local people who are basically insiders. For them the discourse about witchcraft is real and true. The ill person of the local surrounding are regarded as victim and witches are regarded as perpetrator. The insiders have their whole power to regard, structure and legitimate it as true and such kind of discourses are un-modifiable as it lies in their history and serial connection of their past culture.

While the subject is the outsiders, discourse is formed in such a way that knowledge depends on the doctor, and the knowledge basis is a formal educational medicine system. Here the customer/patient is all involved, be it insiders or outsiders. According to their knowledge base, witchcraft is imaginary because it is not scientific and not rational at all. They regard to the best of their knowledge that witches are the victims and witch-hunters are the perpetrators. The outsiders have all the power to regard structure and legitimate the discourse in this way.

In fig. 18, the power relations between the witch and the witch-hunters are clearly showed. All the negative connotations are associated with the witches so the feeling of negativity is enforced for an alleged witch and feel uncomfortable to live in that society. While all the positive connotations are associated with the witch-hunters in the society they live and they are held high. So the witch-hunters feel the sense of power and comfortable to live in their society.

Accordingly, depending on the diagrams shown above, 1) Witches are regarded harmful for the society on the other hand witch-hunters are regarded protector of the society; 2) Witches are considered to be the servant of evil spirit while witch-hunters are to be considered to be the servant of human beings; 3) Witch has to suffer single handedly or sometimes by family supports but witch-hunters are always in groups supported by villagers; 4) Witches are prepared to believe that they are physically and mentally weak while witch-hunters are always made to feel physically and mentally strong; 5) Witches are kept powerless and dominated when witch-hunters are reserved as powerful and

dominant; 6) Witches are forced to obey the witch-hunters when the witch-hunters force the witch to do anything or to say anything; and 7) Witches suffer because of killing, displacement/dislocation and ostracization/banishment by witch-hunters while witch-hunters enjoy by killing, displacing ostracizing the witch.

### **4.3 Witch-hunting as Cultural Violence**

There is no doubt that culture is an integral part of all human civilization, but the 'development factor' which is well-known in civilization is blurring the culture as it is all about generating meanings and ideas, traditions, ethnicity, customs, society and way of life. Nayar (2008) says that, "The term 'culture' meant 'to honor' and 'to protect' when it was originated and derived from the Latin word 'cultura' and 'colere' which means 'to cultivate'. With the passing of years, the 'culture' is understood as the mode of generating meanings and these meanings are governed by power relations". But in the post-modern world while relating to the issue of witch-hunting, there is a contestation of whether culture is always 'to be honored' and 'to be protected' and if not, what should be done to make some changes to culture/society in regard to this.

Culture strongly relies on the value system of the human society giving identity, meaning and sustainment of its own. Culture can hardly be regarded as violence and vice-versa. As a social being every individual like to live in peace and harmony which is in contrast to violence. In a societal group, the societal leaders try to maintain peace and harmony. Nevertheless, for them violence happens to be a necessity sometimes in order to maintain peace and harmony. The violence in group is the collective involvement of societal members towards higher ups. This kind of violence is called 'cultural violence' which also means 'structural violence'.

In defining the idea of cultural violence, Johan Galtung listed six cultural domains viz. - Religion and ideology, language and art, empirical and formal science. While discussing them he gave one or two examples of cultural violence from each domain. According to Galtung (1990), "The term 'cultural violence' means those aspects of culture, the symbolic sphere of our existence- exemplified by religion and ideology; language and art; and empirical science (logic) and formal science (mathematics) that can be used to

justify or legitimize direct or structural violence.” He added the concept of ‘cultural violence’ along with the two forms of violence viz. direct violence and structural violence. He equalizes them with the three different sides of a triangle and differentiates their concepts. Direct violence is an event; structural violence is a process with ups and downs; and cultural violence is an invariant, a ‘permanence’ with given the slow transformations of basic culture. For instance, direct violence is a sudden event or attack without any clue or process followed, which is done by a small group of people. Structural violence is an event of violence done by a large number of people and in a long period. It goes through a process, eg: the process of accusation of witchcraft like pointing, branding, gossiping, village meeting, killing, banishment and so on. In ‘cultural violence’, either ‘direct’ or ‘structural violence can be seen.

If the binary opposite of violence is peace then the binary opposite of ‘cultural violence’ is ‘cultural peace’. Witch-hunting is a practice of a cultural group in order to maintain ‘cultural peace’ but it ends up with a kind of ‘cultural violence’ and the after-effect of this is disturbance in the society, which happens to be a social issue.

The violence associated to witch-hunts is seen as a practice of cultural violence by a societal group whose members have a strong belief in the practice of witchcraft. But it should be made clear here that witch-hunting is not practiced on daily basis, just like cultural festivals and rituals are not organized on daily basis. It is a way of life and custom that has no fixed time or season.

Shashank S. Sinha (2015) in his article on “Culture of violence or violence of culture” wrote that,

The violence accompanying the cases of witch-hunting always followed the pattern of going from ‘bad’ to ‘worse’- at least in the perception of the perpetrators- if the suspect was/is not killed immediately. In the first instance, the ‘witch’ was/is fined, asked to behave, and otherwise threatened. In case there was/is a reoccurrence of deaths, diseases or mishaps in the village, the accused would be thrashed, driven out, forced to swallow urine and human faeces, drink raw blood of a chicken or killed. All or some of these may happen in one stretch or in succession, though not necessarily in that order.

Witch-hunting is the fulfilling of the target called 'violence'. When the belief among the members of the group becomes stronger via their social network system of the community or village, the practice of witch-hunting becomes lively. F. Gary Jesen (2007) also had done a sociological analysis of the colonial witch hunts and opined in a similar line. He studied under the rubrics of deviance, social control and/or collective behavior. According to him, witchcraft is a form of deviant behavior; witch-hunting is a form of social control and the panic reaction is a form of collective behavior.

#### **4.4 Modernity and the loss of faith in traditional beliefs**

In order to understand the loss of faith in traditional beliefs, it is important to understand the beliefs system related to traditional medicines of the society/community. With the emergence of modernity, the loss of faith in traditional medicines has become prominent at this age of globalization.

How does belief in traditional medicine functions in believing that witches exists and how being modern does not believe in existence of witches? There are instances where dreams related to witches destroy the family's socio-economic status and hamper in educational prospects (For justification of this, illustrative cases are discussed in chapter 5). And opposite instances is also there, where dreams related to traditional medicines assist an individual to hold up life realities and strengthen their economic stability. Here it can be mentioned about the real life experiences narrated by an experienced person.

Mrs. X. Basumatary (52 years) has a vast knowledge of medicinal plants and has a record of curing many serious diseases that were left unidentified by modern doctors. When she was 17 years old, she saw a dream that the *Dev-Devi* (male and female God), took her in a far off place in the middle of forest and mountains. The *Dev-Devi* showed her different plants there that make medicine for different diseases when mixed and grinded together. Every night she has been taken there for the training, along with some other people whom she could not recognize till today. During her initial stage, she was scared to try those medicines in real life, but with time, she got promoted to higher learning in dream and got adjusted in implicating them in real life practice. She said that it is very hard to recall all the lessons taught in dream and to apply them in real life, some lessons are left untouched due to forgetting. Many tough rituals had been done by

her in order to get promotion and it was recommended by the *Dev-Devi* that no lessons be disclosed with anyone during the initial stage, strictly prohibited to reveal, otherwise the knowledge would have been taken back.

In the dream training, the *Dev-Devi* taught her to read and write but unfortunately she could not learn them at all, and she still believes that in the real life too she is left illiterate; she feels that if she could have learned in those dreams, she would have now remain literate. Identifying the power of supernatural powers is easy for a *Guru-Ojah* like Mrs. X. Basumatary. Even the witch can be identified by using this ritual process. But it is important to note that, even if the ill person and their family members enquire about the witch, they ignore by saying that they do not know. It is because that Bwigriguri village society has warned the village members that witch should not be hunted or pointed. Mrs. and Mr. Basumatary said happily that, it is good for them not to reveal the name of the witch because this way helps their life to be a secured one.

#### **4.5 Activism and Protests against Witch-hunting in Assam**

Witch-hunting is witnessed as a pernicious and heinous practice in Assam that involves episodes of public frenzy. Both men and women fall victim to this practice where they are subjected to torture and atrocities being branded as witches. As witch-hunting is perceived as one of the most serious social issues in Assam, different government agencies and non-government organizations have taken initiatives of performing remedial measures. There are crusaders, social activists, media personals, administrators, police officials and individuals have shown concern about the subject matter.

This part of discussion highlights the activities or work done in Assam on witch-hunting. It attempts to explore the remedial measures against witch-hunting taken by different governmental and non-governmental organizations assisting in decision making process of the state. Specifically, it discusses about the outsiders' attitude towards witch-hunting. Here, police personnel, Government and non-government officials, academicians, media personnel, scholars and writers are regarded as outsiders. They do not belong to the village or community where witch-hunting is practiced. But there are some limitations in saying so. There are some people (local youths and local leaders including both men and women) who might also be considered as outsiders although they belong to the



community/area/village where witch-hunting is prevalent. It is because of their difference in beliefs and ideas about witch-hunting from the other folks of the same space and culture.

#### **4.5.1 Project Prahari**

Former Additional DGP of Assam, Kuladhar Saikia has been involved in curbing the issue of witch-hunting when he was posted in Kokrajhar as a Western Range Deputy Inspector General of police in 2001. The incidence of killing of five individuals in the year 2000 by allegedly indulging in witchcraft has motivated him to take up the issue seriously and so, he initiated and launched the Assam police project, 'Project Prahari'. Kuladhar Saikia, by running campaigns involving village chiefs and elders, said the involvement of entire communities and the lack of evidence due to the fear of being ostracized had made the task of apprehending the culprits quite challenging. He also said, *"The rural people feared they would be abandoned by the community and the village (if they come forward to report witch-hunting cases). The situation was so bad that even the family members of the victims wouldn't come forward to report such incidents to the police."* The project emphasized on community bonding among the people of the community. (Brahma et al., 2011)

Some social analyst says that the Bodo-dominated Kokrajhar district is particularly vulnerable to witch murders. The high incidence of witch-hunting had prompted the state police to launch Project 'Prahari' a decade ago on August 1, 2001 to spread awareness among people. The Assam police launched 'Project Prahari' ('*Pragatir Hake Raji*' which means people's initiative for progress) for participatory development and people friendly policing to fight social maladies and deprivation. Under this project, Assam police launched awareness drive against 'witch hunting' in the state's remote areas where tribal communities constitute the majority. This project was successful in the initial years and the incidents of witch-hunting witnessed a drastic reduction in 50 villages located in Kokrajhar, Chirang, Goalpara, Udalguri, Baksa and Sonitpur districts. The project has benefited several people in the villages. But the project ran into rough time in 2006, allegedly because of the reluctance of the top brass in Assam Police to continue the same.

Mr. Saikia extended a helping hand by providing self-employment opportunities using the locally available resources. The concept was blending participatory development with community policing. The project did work and in less than three years witch-hunting became a thing of past in the village. The success of the project led to declaration of “Project Prahari” a State-wide project. Project Prahari, aims to educate people about the menace and introduce community policing. The other main Objectives of the Project are:-

- Prevention of social conflict and delinquencies.
- Empowerment, knowledge accessibility and capacity building of the underprivileged for vertical mobility.
- Social participation, decision making and management of development.
- Foster community ownership of development.
- Building Social capital through inclusion by bottom up strategy in contrast to the “top down effect”
- Reconnecting the individuals with community, and communities with the government and economy.
- A human face to the Uniform. (Ibid, 2011)

Under the project, a multi-pronged approach was adopted by forming community management groups and people were convinced to shift their focus from destructive menaces like witch hunting to participatory development. Mr. Saikia and police acted as the agents of change. They motivated different sections of society by conducting many meetings to change their thought orientation. Experts from different fields were called to develop resources. Women’s weaving and bamboo craft skills were expanded and they were made the keeper of community money which helped with women empowerment. The success of project led to its replication across 50 villages in Assam. Seeing the tremendous benefits of the project other states also have shown interest to implement the same.

In January, 2011, Project Prahari revived in collaboration with the Assam State Commission for Women (ASCW), which aims to educate people about the menace and

introduce community policing. The project was revived with a public awareness meeting at U N Brahma Vocational Girls' High School, Habrubari, Serfanguri in Kokrajhar district.

#### **4.5.2 Assam Mahila Samata Society**

Assam Mahila Samata Society (AMSS) is an autonomous society registered in 1996 under Society registration act 1860. This society works towards the betterment of women in Assam. Geetarani Bhattacharya, the state programme director of Assam Mohila Samata Society, an activist for a decade, has handled more than 80 cases of witch-hunting in Assam. She believes that, *“Earlier people used to blame witches for calamities like prolonged sickness or crop failure. Now-a-days they use personal grudge to victimize someone by declaring him or her a witch. Witch-hunting is a worldwide phenomenon but witch-hunting in Assam has been thriving mainly because of lack of education, medical facilities and social and economic empowerment as far as women are concerned. Activists under this banner have been creating awareness against such practices in rural areas and also trying to educate people in general and empower women in particular.”*

Assam Mohila Samata Society started a project in 1996. The title of the project is- “Mass Campaign against the Practice of Witch Craft in Goalpara District of Assam”. The proposal of this project seeks to address the issue of witch hunting prevalent in Goalpara District of Assam.

The main objectives of this project are:

- To develop consultative approaches among the victims concerned government organization and NGOs to develop a framework for social initiatives to eradicate the problems of witch craft/hunting from the society and organizing the masses for the said purpose.
- To develop packages of mass communication and social awareness on the problem of witch craft/hunting along with strategic approaches to address the issue. To empower marginalized families.

In 1999, Birubala Rabha joined Assam Mahila Samata Society (AMSS) and became an active member of the society. Birubala is a 70 years old widow from Goalpara district of Assam whose crusade against witch-hunting started since the time when the traditional medicine man could not treat her eldest son from mental illness and asserted that the patient was possessed by demon and would die in three days. But she could see that he is still alive and lives in Meghalaya at present. So, based on her experience, Birubala creates awareness among the masses against such evil practices prevailing in the society and she strongly believes that, “*Belief on witchcraft is a superstitious belief.*” For the relentless fight against witch-hunting, she was nominated by an NGO, North East Network (NEN), as a possible recipient of Noble Peace Price for the year 2005. She also found mention in the Switzerland 1,000 women peace project among 150 countries of the world. In 2008, she was elicited in Mumbai by Reliance Industry Limited under their third edition ‘Real Heroes: Ordinary people, extraordinary service’. (Dutta, 2015)

She has been nominated for Somajpran Sarbeswar Dutta Memorial award, 2011 by the SIF foundation for media and social welfare, Assam in October, 2011. In 2012, she has been conferred with a prestigious award called, ‘Jaymati Award’ by the ‘Ladies Club’, a frontline women body of Dibrugarh. Birubala Rabha, known for her crusade against witch-hunting, was also awarded the 12th Upendra Nath Brahma Soldier of Humanity in Kokrajhar on 4<sup>th</sup> July, 2015. She has also been conferred with honorary Doctorate degree by Gauhati University on 30th March, 2015, for fighting a tough battle against the menace of witchcraft and witch-hunting in Assam for over a decade now.

#### **4.5.3 Mission Birubala**

Birubala Rabha established a Non Government Organization, on October 23, 2011, which is named as ‘Mission Birubala’. This NGO is run by Birubala at present and it aims at fighting the problem of witch-hunting exclusively and more effectively (Dutta, 2015).

She initially operated with the support of the Assam Mahila Samata Society (AMSS) and gained popularity in the field of eradication of the social problem of witch-hunting. (To know her awards and achievements, flashback as mentioned above in 4.5.1.2 part). She

is at present an eminent social worker in Goalpara district working on eradicating existing superstitions that often lead to witch-hunting practice in various tribal-dominated areas of Assam. She is regarded as a seasoned anti-superstition campaigner of the state, Assam.

Birubala Rabha says, *“I used to travel with NGOs to campaign against witch-hunting. I even walked for several kilometers to save the girls. It’s a fight for womanhood against patriarchy, because most of the quacks are men and most of the witch-hunting victims’ women. Out of the 35 people I have personally rescued, 33 are women and two are men.”*

Working with this NGO, Birubala Rabha pressurized the state and central government to curb the social evil of witch-hunting by speaking in public that, *“We have not seen a massive campaign yet from the government to erase the notion of witches from the minds of rural people. Immediate steps should be taken to disseminate scientific temperament among people so that witch-hunting can be eradicated from grassroots”* (Bhattacharjee, 2014).

The basic objective of “Mission Birubala” is to find out women and children who have suffered due to the existing social evils in Assam and to put in an effort to rehabilitate them properly so that they can lead a dignified life in society.

#### **4.5.4 Other Non-Government Organisations (NGOs)**

Few more NGOs are also working against witch-hunting, which include North East Network, Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti, Sadou Asom Pragatisheel Nari Sanstha, Women in Governance (WinG) and NEW Net, requested the public as well as concerned authorities to support their appeal for the greater good of the society.

The appeal demanded that witch hunting be recognized as a shameful act and a gross violation of an individual’s right to a life of dignity and security, to recognize women as a risk group and most vulnerable in witch-hunting which also encourages migration and displacement and finally into trafficking and sexual abuse.

The NGOs mentioned that there is a need to bring up a State policy to combat the discriminatory and harmful practice of witch-hunting and associated violence against women.

Further, the NGO gives immediate rescue to all the family members of the victim of witch-hunting, provides necessary protection and social reintegration.

#### **4.5.5 Assam State Commission for Women**

The Assam State Commission for Women (ASCW) had undertaken a project, titled “Targeted Intervention and Prevention of Witch-Hunting in Affected Areas of Assam”. While addressing a sensitizing programme for police officers on July 20, 2013, ASCW Chairperson Meera Baruah said, “*The commission has taken up several steps to prevent witch-hunting in the society by visiting the affected places, holding awareness meetings.*” (ibid).

The project under ASCW is designed to eradicate witch-hunting, raise the level of awareness mainly regarding health aspect, increase the rate of literacy and foster economic empowerment among the under privileged sections of the society with the help of different government schemes. ASCW most often organizes awareness meet with the people who lives in witch-hunting prone areas.

This commission has constituted a select group for drafting a special law against witch-hunting and they have submitted the draft to the Government of Assam in 2012 and it was expected to be proposed as a bill.

#### **4.5.6 Bodo Organizations**

Bodo organizations working against witch-hunting practice include- All Bodo Students Union (ABSU), All Bodo Women’s Welfare Forum (ABWW), Boro Samaj, Bodo Sahitya Sabha and Bodo Peoples Progressive Front (BPF). Both BPF and ABSU have organized several rallies and awareness programmes to curb witch-hunting in different parts of Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC).

From time to time, Bodo organisations viz. - All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) and All Bodo Women Welfare Forum (ABWWF) organized mass protest and campaign against the killings of innocent people in the name of Witch-Hunting. They are trying to find out the steps for eradicating this evil practice from the society by spreading information of health and education.

#### **4.6 “Prevention of and Protection from Witch-hunting bill, 2015”**

The presence and active participation of organizations like Assam Mahila Samata Society (AMSS), Assam State Commission for Women (ASCW), All Bodo Students’ Union (ABSU), All Tea Tribe Students’ Association (ATTSA), All Rabha Students’ Union (ARSU), Mission Birubala and other NGOs etc., has added significance to the crusade and movements against witch-hunting since the menace assumed dangerous proportions among the tribal and backward communities.

The Government of Assam have passed the “Prevention of and Protection from Witch-hunting bill, 2015” in August, 2015. The draft Bill has been prepared at the instruction of the Gauhati High Court, which has asked the state to initiate the process on the basis of a city-based lawyer Rajib Kalita’s PIL in 2013, seeking formulation of an anti-witch hunt law. Major punishments for offences mentioned in this bill are:

1. Whoever, accuses, brands or identifies or defames, either by words, actions or any other manner, a person by calling him/her Daainee, Dayan or Dakan or Dakini, Chudail or Bhootni or Tonahi or Tonaha or by any other name or symbol suggesting the person to be a witch. And whoever instigates or aids or abets a person to perform witchcraft or performing any ritual, spells or any other act aimed at harming any person by any means; shall be punished with imprisonment or a term which shall not be less than three years but can extend up to a term which shall not be less than three years but can extend up to a term of seven years and with fine, which shall not be less than Rs. 50,000/- but may extend to Rs. 5 lakhs.
2. Whoever, assaults or uses criminal force or causes assault or use of criminal force against person accusing him/her to be a witch, resulting in his/her death, shall be

punished in accordance with section 302 of the Indian Penal Code (Central Act 45 of 1860). It is a punishment for murder. It says whoever commits murder shall be punished with death, or 1[imprisonment for life], and shall also be liable to fine (Public Notice, 2015).

The Coordination Committee against Superstition, an umbrella body of activists and NGOs in Assam, has sought translation of the Prevention of and protection from Witch Hunt Bill drafted by the Assam government into Assamese, Bodo and Hindi languages for better public discussion before it is passed by the state Assembly.

### **Analysis**

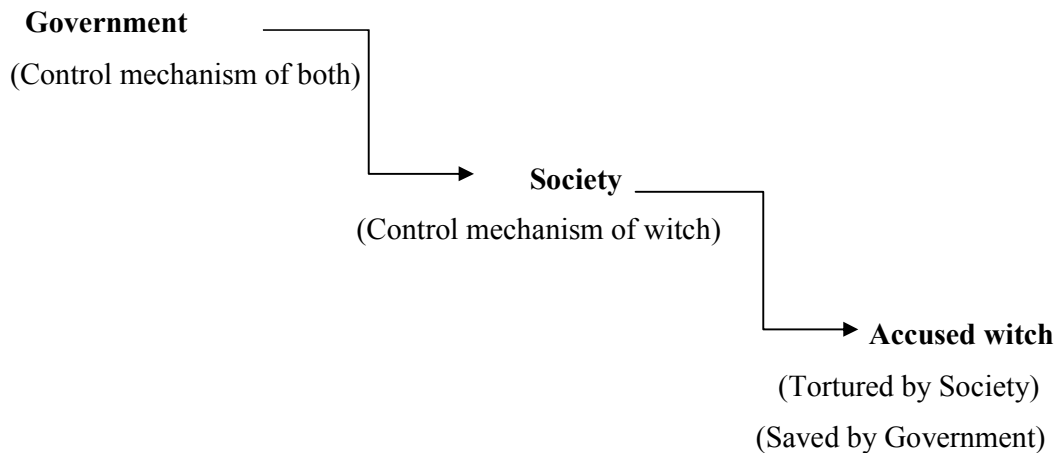
According to the insiders, the witch-hunters hunt witches for the safety of their society and acts as a controlling mechanism. But, above that society, there is the government who controls the state and society as a whole who believes that creating/drafting a bill for enactment of a law/policy (to be included in the constitution of India) against witch-hunting might be for the safety of the society. And it is understood that the members of Non-government organizations and other social organizations are speaking on behalf of the accused witches. They speak against witch-hunting practice in such a way that their voice reaches the government of Assam and India as a whole, which might help the government to implement a policy/act against this social issue.

- 1) Top-down model of policy against witch-hunting: By analyzing the remedial measures taken by Government and the Non-government organizations in Assam, it can be said that the policy against witch-hunting has a top-down character. The society where witch-hunting occurs most often organizes a general meeting/village meeting in order to identify and punish the accused witch in order to save the society from harm and misfortune. And for the safety of that society, the society acts as a controlling mechanism. But, above that society, there is the government who controls the state and society as a whole. The state is at work by following the constitution of the country. So, here it can be analyzed that, the outsiders believes in creating/drafting a bill for enactment of a law/policy (to be included in the constitution of India) against witch-hunting



which might be for the safety of the society. This is understood as an approach of a top-down model.

**Fig. 19: Top-down model of policy against witch-hunting**



- 2) Who is speaking on behalf of the accused witch? First, an accused witch loses his/her respect in the village where (s) he lives, soon after carrying a tag of being a witch. Second, people ignore his/her voice or explanation. Third, they and their family suffer in trauma and social exclusion. So it is the members of non-government organizations, media personals, social activists, outsider individuals and researchers who raise voice for them and on behalf of them by interviewing and protesting. They speak against witch-hunting practice in such a way that their voice reaches the government of Assam and India as a whole, which in a way might help the government to implement a policy/act against this social issue. They also established rehabilitation center for accused witches in order to support them and offer help through rehabilitation process. Different social organizations and associations in Assam are still seen as organizing awareness programmes, rally, protests and campaign in the society where witch-hunting occurs from time to time.

Following the footsteps of Jharkhand, Bihar, Odisha and Rajasthan, which have special laws to deal with witchcraft, the Assam Government has drafted and passed a Bill titled, “Prevention of and Protection from Witch Hunting Bill, 2015” which has not yet been included as an act.

#### **4.7 Awareness, Difficulties and Challenges**

Witch-hunting is a global social issue but it differs in contexts, as people shares different cultures; live with different societies and resides in different regions and so on and so forth. Assam, where different ethnic groups with different culture live together, the issue of witch-hunting has become critical to understand and generalize because the context differs. The nature of belief system, process of hunting witches and information about such incidence are always confusing. As a result of which there are some people living in Assam who are not aware of the issue and some starving and fighting against the issue, some overcoming difficulties and challenging the issue and there are some people who are for the motion of witch-hunting. The outsider and insider standpoint remains as two opposite viewpoints. Bipul Rabha, a *Gaon burah* (village headman) of a Rabha-dominated village in Goalpara district which occasionally witnesses witch-hunting incidents, admits, “*It is very difficult to go astray from a parampara (tradition) for a tribal society, unless it sees development through education*” (Bhattacharjee, 2014).

So, in order to understand the outsider’s awareness about the issue and their difficulties and challenges, two set of questionnaires, ‘Set A Questionnaire’ and ‘Set B Questionnaire’ has been prepared and distributed for responses. To understand the difficulties and challenges faced by the people who work against witch-hunting and arrange crusades, protests and awareness programmes, the ‘Set A Questionnaire’ has been distributed and their responses has been analyzed in the following paragraphs. And for looking at the awareness about the issue of witch-hunting, among the common literate people of the state, the students, research scholars, academicians and writers, has been distributed with the ‘Set B Questionnaire’ and their responses has been analyzed accordingly.

#### **Analysis of ‘Set A Questionnaire’ (For the list of questions, see Annexure IV, page no. XVII-XVIII)**

The members of different police stations, non-government organizations and other organizations who are aware of witch-hunting as a social evil gave some important viewpoints accordingly to the questions that were asked in the questionnaire. Their responses have been analyzed thoroughly. The analysis is based on sixteen respondents.

Almost 77% of the respondent organization says that there is no any independent project on witch-hunting funded till date. But along with other projects of their organization, they make an effort to sensitize people about the issue of witch-hunting. They mainly organize awareness programmes by holding meetings, street plays and rally from time to time in the witch-hunting prone areas. They also provide social support and rehabilitation to the victim.

According to 90% of the total respondents, “Media is playing a very vital role but can work more effectively if they try to highlight the root causes rather than making a story out of it”.

Almost all of the respondents said that health and poverty are the main reasons behind witch-hunting. They opined that most of the people still believe witches exist in reality. As there is no medical facilities people prefer to go to the local medicine men and these healers take the advantage as there is no other option rather than trusting them. Due to ignorance people are superstitious too and they fall prey of the situation.

Regarding the passing of “Prevention of and protection from witch-hunting bill, 2015”, the respondents are very serious and want the law against witch-hunting to be enacted very soon. They believe that having an action research by involving the communities to understand and take part as an active agent to stop such offence can eradicate witch-hunting from the society.

**Analysis of ‘Set B Questionnaire’ (For the list of questions, see Annexure IV, page no. XVIII- XIX)**

The academicians, research scholars and students have responded the questions included in the questionnaire in different ways. Their responses have been analyzed thoroughly. The following analysis is based on sixteen respondents.

- 1) 100% of the total respondents have heard and seen many cases (ranging from 5 to 50 cases) of witch-hunting that took place in different parts of Assam but only

through newspapers and news channels. They have never come across the privilege of offering help to the victims as they haven't met any.

- 2) 64% of the total respondent assumes that, in Assam, there are 3-30 cases of witch-hunting every year and 36% assumes 30-100 cases are being occurred. Almost all the respondents believe that 50% of the witch-hunting cases are reported to the police and the other 50% are left unreported.
- 3) According to 43% of the respondents, some witch-hunting cases are not reported to the police because people of those places are scared to report for they may be suspected or killed as well and because witch-hunting is a collective violence. So, it is because of the social pressure or stigma that people hide to report to the police. While 57% of the respondents opined that some cases of witch-hunting are left unreported due to remoteness of the place from police station, ignorance and lack of consciousness about the legal procedure.
- 4) 50% of the total respondents gave their viewpoint that the main causes of witch-hunting are personal grudge, enmity, property dispute; and the other half believes that superstitions, illiteracy gender inequality and poverty are the main causes of witch-hunts in Assam.
- 5) 90% of the total respondents opined that media plays a positive role in portrayal of witch-hunting. It can bring the issue of witch-hunting to the fore front and government cannot turn a blind eye to the problem. It also sensitizes people through regular coverage, reporting the cases and following up the cases.
- 6) Regarding the passing of "Prevention of and protection from witch-hunting bill, 2015", almost all the respondents believes that the bill will help in eradicating the issue of witch-hunting from the society but very slowly because it needs time for people to first understand the bill clearly. They also suggest the government to simultaneously organize programmes for community sensitization and greater vigilance on the part of police.

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